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The Role of the House Majority Leader: An Overview

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Summary

The majority leader in the contemporary House is second-in-command behind the Speaker of the majority party. Typically, the majority leader functions as the Speaker's chief lieutenant or "field commander" for day-to-day management of the floor. Although the majority leader's duties are not especially well-defined, they have evolved to the point where it is possible to spotlight two fundamental and often interlocking responsibilities that orient the majority leader's work: institutional and party.

From an institutional perspective, the majority leader has a number of duties. Scheduling floor business is a prime responsibility of the majority leader. Although scheduling the House's business is a collective activity of the majority party, the majority leader has a large say in shaping the chamber's overall agenda and in determining when, whether, how, or in what order legislation is taken up. In addition, the majority leader is active in constructing winning coalitions for the party's legislative priorities; acting as a public spokesman — defending and explaining the party's program and agenda; serving as an emissary to the White House, especially when the President is of the same party; and facilitating the orderly conduct of the House's business.

From a party perspective, three key activities undergird the majority leader's principal goal of trying to ensure that the party remains in control of the House. First, the majority leader assists in the reelection campaigns of party incumbents by, for example, raising campaign funds and traveling to scores of House districts to campaign either with incumbents or challengers of the party. Second, the majority leader promotes the party's agenda by developing themes and issues important to core supporters in the electorate. Third, the majority leader encourages party cohesion by, for instance, working to minimize internal factional disagreements that may undermine the majority party's ability to govern the House.

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The Role of the House Majority Leader: An Overview

The majority leader in the contemporary House is second-in-command behind the Speaker of the majority party. Typically, the majority leader functions as the Speaker's chief lieutenant or "field commander" for day-to-day management of the floor. "I'm the Speaker's agent," stated a recent majority leader.¹ Another majority leader said: "I see it that [the Speaker] is the chairman of the board and I am the chief executive officer."² Or as one Speaker put it, the majority leader's "job is to run the floor and keep monitoring committees and legislation."³

Elected every two years by secret ballot of the party caucus or conference, the majority leader is usually an experienced legislator. For example, Representative Richard Armey of Texas became the GOP's first majority leader in 40 years when Republicans won control of the 104th House in the November 1994 elections. Armey began his House service in 1985, became GOP Conference chairman during the 103rd Congress, and was one of the principal authors of the Republican "Contract with America." When Richard Gephardt, D-MO, became majority leader in June 1989, he had been in the House for more than a decade, had served as chairman of the Democratic Caucus for four years, and had been a 1988 presidential candidate.

Two fundamental and often interlocking responsibilities orient the work of the majority leader: institutional and party. From an institutional perspective, the majority leader is principally responsible for exercising overall supervision of the order of business on the floor, especially as it affects the party's program. As Lewis Deschler, the late House parliamentarian (1928-1974), wrote:

A party's floor leader, in conjunction with other party leaders, plays an influential role in the formulation of party policy and programs. He is instrumental in guiding legislation favored by his party through the House, or in resisting those programs of the other party that are considered undesirable by his own party. He is instrumental in devising and implementing his party's strategy on the floor with respect to promoting or opposing legislation. He is kept constantly informed as to the status of legislative business and as to the sentiment of his party respecting particular legislation under consideration. Such information is derived in part from the floor leader's contacts with his party's

¹ Mark Wegner, "The Speaker's Agent," National Journal's *CongressDailyAM*, May 14, 2002, p. 16.

² Jonathan Kaplan, "Hastert, DeLay: Political Pros Get Along To Go Along," *The Hill*, July 22, 2003, p. 8.

³ Alan Ota, "Setbacks Test Hastert's Leadership Style," *CQ Today*, May 4, 2005, p. 24.

members serving on House committees, and with the members of the party's whip organization.⁴

From a partisan perspective, the majority leader's paramount assignment is to employ his or her talents, energy, and knowledge of procedural rules and political circumstances to insure that the party maintains majority control of the House. Each of these major responsibilities gives rise to a wide range of leadership activities. Before discussing the primary duties of the majority leader, it is worth highlighting the historical origins of this party position.

Origin of the Majority Leader Position

Congressional scholars assert that in 1899 Speaker David Henderson, R-Iowa, appointed Sereno E. Payne, R-NY, as the first officially designated majority leader.⁵ Prior to this date, there is neither an accurate nor complete compilation of House majority leaders. Two factors seem to account for the absence of a compilation. First, it took many decades before anything like our modern party structure emerged in the House. As a result, not until nearly the end of the 19th century did the position of "majority leader" become a recognized party office. Second, neither official congressional sources nor party records of this early period identify a lawmaker as *the* majority floor leader.

Several historians of the House suggest that from the chamber's early beginnings various lawmakers informally assumed the role of "floor leader." Usually, but not always, these informal party leaders were the chairs of either the Committee on Ways and Means (established in 1795) or the Committee on Appropriations (following its creation in 1865). Speakers often appointed either their allies or their principal rivals for the speakership to head these panels. Explained the late Floyd M. Riddick, a political scientist who served as parliamentarian of the Senate from 1951 to 1975:

In the House, the early titular floor leaders were at the same time the chairmen of the Ways and Means Committee. Before the division of the work of that committee, the duties of its chairmen were so numerous that they automatically became the actual leaders, since as chairmen of that committee they had to direct the consideration of most of the legislation presented to the House. From 1865 until 1896 the burden of handling most of the legislation was shifted to the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, who then was designated most frequently as the leader. From 1896 until 1910 once again the chairmen of the Ways and Means Committee were usually sought as the floor leaders. During all of these years before the "Cannon revolution" of 1910, the Speaker, who appointed all members to committees, saw to it that his party opponent for

⁴ Lewis Deschler, *Deschler's Precedents of the United States House of Representatives*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), pp. 211-212.

⁵ Randall B. Ripley, *Party Leaders in the House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1967), p. 24.

Speakership, some Representative with a large following, or one of his faithful lieutenants was made the floor leader.⁶

Thus, these early titular floor leaders were appointed by the Speaker rather than chosen separately, as occurs today, by vote of the majority party caucus.⁷ (**Appendix 1** contains a list of House majority leaders since 1899.)

When the House “revolted” in 1910 against the autocratic leadership of Speaker Joseph Cannon, R-Ill., the power to designate the floor leader was taken away from the Speaker. In 1911, with Democrats in charge of the House, Oscar Underwood of Alabama became the first elected (by the party caucus) majority leader in the House’s history. (Subsequently, all Democratic floor leaders have been selected in this manner.) Underwood also chaired the Ways and Means Committee and his party’s committee assignment panel. The political reality was that Majority Leader Underwood’s influence in the House exceeded that of the Speaker, Champ Clark of Missouri. “For the first time the leader of the House was not at the rostrum, but was on the floor.”⁸ Probably no majority leader ever has matched Underwood’s party power and institutional influence. (Underwood left the House for the Senate in 1915.)

When Republicans reclaimed majority control of the House in 1919, Franklin Mondell of Wyoming, a high ranking member of the Appropriations Committee, became majority leader upon nomination by the GOP committee assignment panel. (Four years later the GOP Conference began the practice of electing their majority leader.)⁹ Mondell set the contemporary practice of majority leaders usually relinquishing their committee positions, and always any committee chairmanships,

⁶ Floyd M. Riddick, *The United States Congress: Organization and Procedure* (Manassas, Va.: National Capitol Publishers, Inc., 1949), p. 86. For further historical information about the floor leader, see DeAlva Stanwood Alexander, *History and Procedure of the House of Representatives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), Chapter VII; Garrison Nelson, “Leadership Position-Holding in the United States House of Representatives,” *Capitol Studies*, Fall 1976, pp. 11-36; and the *Congressional Record - Appendix*, vol. 102, Mar. 20, 1956, pp. A2489-A2494. The *Record* insertion is a report on the majority leadership prepared by George B. Galloway for then-House Majority Leader John McCormack, D-MA.

⁷ Early House members also recognized that certain lawmakers informally assumed floor leadership roles on behalf of presidents or executive officials. For example, in 1789 Congress requested Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton to prepare a plan to deal with the public debt. Representatives Fisher Ames and Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts and Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut “served as Hamilton’s lieutenants on the chamber floor, exercising some control over what proposals were made and how they were voted on by coordinating Hamilton’s supporters in the House.” John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Party Politics in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 79. President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) also relied on trusted House members to function as de facto floor leaders to shepherd his program through the House.

⁸ George Rothwell Brown, *The Leadership of Congress* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1922), p. 176. Also see James S. Fleming, “Oscar W. Underwood: The First Modern House Leader, 1911-1915,” in Roger H. Davidson, et. al., eds., *Masters of the House: Congressional Leadership Over Two Centuries* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 91-118.

⁹ Ripley, *Party Leaders in the House of Representatives*, p. 25.

upon assuming this important and busy post. To be sure, there have been exceptions to the practice of majority leaders not serving on standing committees.¹⁰

April 15, 1929, the start of the 71st Congress, witnessed a first-ever event that remains the practice to this day: the official announcement in the House of the selection of the majority leader. Representative Willis Hawley of Oregon, the chairman of the majority Republican caucus addressed the presiding officer: “Mr. Speaker, the Republican caucus of the House has reelected Hon. John Q. Tilson, of Connecticut, majority leader for the Seventy-first Congress.” As House precedents state, “this was the first occasion of the official announcement of the selection of party leaders in the House.”¹¹

Separate election of the majority leader by the party caucus elevated the status and influence of the person who held this position. The majority leader soon became the “heir apparent” to the speakership. In the modern House, no Democrat has been elected Speaker without having been the majority leader immediately prior to his elevation. Republicans, the minority party for 40 consecutive years until the mid-1990s, do not have as well-defined a leadership succession ladder. When Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-GA., retired from the House at the end of the 105th Congress, Appropriations Chairman Bob Livingston, R-LA., moved quickly and lined up the necessary votes to be the next Speaker. However, when Livingston announced that he planned to resign from the House for personal reasons soon after the 106th Congress began, Republicans chose their chief deputy whip, Dennis J. Hastert of Illinois, to be the next Speaker.

Unfortunately, there is scant scholarly commentary about the duties and functions that devolved upon the informal floor leaders of the pre-20th century period. Nor are the duties and functions of today’s majority leaders spelled out in the House rulebook or in party rules, although those sources make brief reference to the position. As a recent majority leader stated, “[E]ach leadership position is defined by

¹⁰ For example, starting in the 1970s, Democratic majority leaders held leadership-designated positions on the Budget Committee and served ex officio on the Permanent Select Intelligence Committee. Since Republicans took control of the House in the mid-1990s, the majority leader has held no standing committee positions. However, in 2002, Majority Leader Richard Armey (R-TX), chaired a Select Committee on Homeland Security. This panel assembled the recommendations of several standing committees to craft legislation (H.R. 5005) authorizing the creation of a Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security. As an historical point of interest, it is worth noting that Underwood’s successor as majority leader was North Carolinian Claude Kitchin (1915-1919), who also served as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. However, Kitchin disapproved of President Wilson’s war policies and his floor and committee roles proved to be “cumbersome and impractical,” as one scholar wrote. “A separation of the two roles was effected after the Democrats became the minority in 1919. Ever since then, the majority leader’s job has existed as a full-time position.” See Nelson Polsby, “The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives,” *American Political Science Review*, Sept. 1968, pp. 157-158.

¹¹ Clarence Cannon, *Cannon’s Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States*, Vol. VIII (Washington: GPO, 1935), p. 957.

the person who holds it. It's not defined by a job description."¹² In short, factors such as tradition, custom, context, and personality have largely defined the fundamental institutional and party roles and responsibilities of the majority leader. Several of the most important of these two overlapping categories merit mention. However, it bears repeating that the scope of the majority leader's role in carrying out these assignments is shaped significantly by the Speaker and the sentiments of the majority party caucus or conference.

Institutional

The style and role of any majority leader is influenced by a plethora of elements, including personality and contextual factors, such as the closeness of his relationship with the Speaker, the size and cohesion of the majority party, whether the party controls the White House, the general political environment in the House, and the controversial nature of the legislative agenda. Despite the variability of these factors, a number of institutional assignments are now associated with the majority leader, and Members of each party expect him or her to perform them. To be sure, the majority leader is provided with extra staff resources beyond those accorded him or her as a House member to assist in carrying out these diverse leadership functions. Majority Leader Armey even established a new leadership post — “assistant majority leader” — at the start of the 106th Congress and named two Republican colleagues as assistant majority leaders. Their assignment was to assist him on “floor scheduling, legislative and communications strategy, the policy agenda, and leadership decisions.”¹³

Scheduling Floor Business

Although scheduling is a collective activity of the majority party, the majority leader has a large say in shaping the chamber's overall agenda and in determining when, whether, how, and in what order legislation is taken up. Everything from setting policy priorities; drafting the schedule; consulting with Members, committee chairs, and the minority party in making up the schedule; and announcing the schedule on the floor are within the purview of the majority leader. Scheduling is a complex process and the majority leader must juggle a wide range of considerations and pressures. Five concerns illustrate the scheduling role of the majority leader.

First, the majority leader commonly lays out the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual agenda of the House. Of course, scheduling and agenda-setting are responsibilities done in close consultation with the Speaker, majority whip, and others. The majority leader may specify in advance that certain priority bills are to be taken up prior to a congressional recess; he or she may even designate theme weeks (“reform,” “high tech,” “families first,” and so on) for the consideration of related bills. Typically, on Thursday after the House's business for the day and week is winding down, the majority leader will announce the projected agenda for each day

¹² Ben Pershing, “DeLay Adjusting to His New Role,” *Roll Call*, Mar. 17, 2003, p. 3.

¹³ *CQ Monitor*, Jan. 21, 1999, p. 8.

of the next business week, identify when votes are expected to occur, and respond to inquiries from Members about the House's program of activities.

Second, a host of strategic considerations influence scheduling. For instance, with an eye toward upcoming elections, the majority leader may schedule legislation that better defines his or her party for the upcoming presidential and congressional campaigns. He or she may not schedule a bill unless there is reasonable certainty that the Senate will take floor action on it. The majority leader may also coordinate strategy on measures with the Senate party counterpart. He or she may schedule floor action at specific times — for instance, a constitutional amendment to ban flag desecration just before July 4 — to maximize public attention on the issue. The majority leader may use “deadline lawmaking,” indicating to Members that floor action on certain legislation must occur before the House will adjourn for a district work period. Or he or she may suggest general themes, messages, or strategies that unify party colleagues around a set of domestic and international policies. A majority leader may even propose his or her own annual legislative agenda — even if the White House is controlled by the same party — and present it to the Speaker and the party's caucus or conference.

Third, majority leaders try to balance the House's workload requirements with Members' family or personal obligations. “Family friendly” scheduling aims to achieve better balance in the public and private lives of lawmakers. Fourth, majority leaders advance or delay action on measures for a variety of reasons, including whether they have the votes to achieve their objectives. To be sure, there are occasions when measures are brought to the floor, and it is unclear whether they will pass. Asked if a bill would pass, a majority leader replied: “Who knows? We're writing the bill on the floor.”¹⁴

Fifth, majority leaders recognize that timing considerations suffuse the lawmaking process. There are timetables to meet, pressures associated with the end-of-session rush to adjourn, the electoral needs of individual Members, and a multitude of other considerations that the majority leader must address as he strives to accommodate the rank-and-file, committee chairs, the minority party, the president, and his own extended party leadership. As one majority leader put it: “You have to find that elusive grail of harmony among this most heterogeneous mix of opinionated individualists.”¹⁵

Manage Floor Decision Making

Majority leaders are active in constructing winning coalitions for their legislative priorities. To this end, a majority leader will consult with the chair of the Rules Committee to discuss procedures for considering legislation on the floor. For example, an open or restricted amendment process might be options for discussion. Or, the majority leader might decide to call up a bill under suspension of the rules

¹⁴ Andrew Taylor, “Budget Enforcement Legislation Founders in the House,” *CQ Today*, June 24, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁵ Julia Malone, “To Jim Wright, Being Majority Leader Is One Long Juggling Routine,” *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 19, 1983, p. 40.

procedure, which limits debate and bars any amendments. To limit policy riders on appropriations bills, the majority leader might invoke House Rule XXI, clause 2 (d). This rule grants preference to the majority leader to end consideration of an appropriations bill in the Committee of the Whole by offering a successful “motion to rise.”¹⁶

Majority leaders engage in many other activities to promote policy success on the floor. They may, for instance, meet weekly or biweekly (more frequently, if needed) with committee chairs, ad hoc groups, or individual lawmakers to persuade them to support priority measures; woo lawmakers through the provision of various legislative services or rewards; coordinate vote counts with the party whip organization; propose changes in bills to attract support from wavering Members; reach out to lawmakers on the other side of the aisle; craft “leadership amendments” designed to attract majority support; synchronize strategic activities with majority floor managers; and rally outside support for the party’s legislative issues and political messages.

Majority leaders may also take on other functions relevant to floor action. To forge winning coalitions, for instance, they engage in deal-making, appeal to Members’ party loyalty, enlist allies to overcome resistance to policy-party objectives, devote considerable time and energy in promoting consensus among colleagues, and work behind-the-scenes to get things done. Majority leaders might also encourage party colleagues to deliver one-minute, morning hour, or special order speeches that spotlight the party’s program and defend it against criticism from the other party.

Public Spokesman

There are two interconnected dimensions associated with this role: external and internal. Externally, especially in this “24/7” news cycle and Internet era, majority leaders are national newsmakers. When he became majority leader in 1973, Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr., D-MA., said, “the media couldn’t stay away ... I was interviewed

¹⁶ The Rules of the House make specific reference to the majority leader in several other instances. Rule II, clause 6, states that the House’s inspector general “shall be appointed for a Congress by the Speaker, the Majority leader, and the Minority Leader, acting jointly.” Rule II, clause 8, states that the “Office of General Counsel shall function pursuant to the direction of the Speaker, who shall consult with a Bipartisan Leadership Advisory Group, which shall include the majority and minority leaderships.” Under Rule IX, a question of privilege offered from the floor by the majority leader “shall have precedence of all other questions except motions to adjourn.” Under Rule X, clause 2, not later than “March 31 in the first session of a Congress, after consultation with the Speaker, the Majority Leader, and the Minority Leader, the Committee on Government Reform shall report to the House the oversight plans” of the standing committees along with any recommendation it or the House leaders have proposed to ensure the effective coordination of committees’ oversight plans. By tradition, the majority leader also serves as a member of the House Office Building Commission, and he names three members to serve as Private Calendar objectors. In addition, the majority leader may, after consultation with the Speaker, during any even-numbered year convene an early organizational caucus or conference.

constantly.”¹⁷ Majority leaders are expected to explain and defend the actions and decisions of the House and their party to the general public. “The role of the majority leader puts you in a spokesman role,” noted a recent majority leader.¹⁸ Accordingly, these leaders appear on the major network and cable television programs, the Sunday morning news shows, talk radio, or Internet chat rooms. Periodically, they deliver major addresses in diverse forums, and write articles or “op ed” pieces on the major issues before the House. They meet with journalists and newspaper editors. Regularly, they give news briefings (so-called pen and pad sessions) to reporters on the schedule and agenda of the House, the priorities of the majority party, legislative-executive relations, and sundry other topics.

Internally, majority leaders are ready on the floor to defend their party, program, or President from criticism by the opposition. They participate in debate on measures and may make the closing argument on legislation. Majority leaders rise to defend the prerogatives of individual Members; offer critiques and rebuttals to minority party initiatives; work with committee chairmen and others to coordinate and integrate the party’s communication strategy; employ floor speeches “to set the tone on a newsworthy issue or provide the proscribed leadership perspective before a major vote”;¹⁹ and may establish websites to provide information to House members and others. In brief, majority leaders generally function as their party’s chief spokesman on the floor and in other forums as well.

Sometimes the internal and external roles coincide when majority leaders introduce legislation, monitor executive branch actions, or champion proposals nationally. For example, Majority Leader Armey and another GOP colleague traveled the country in a “Scrap the Code Tour,” a “national campaign to take the tax reform debate directly to the American people.”²⁰ Armey also attracted national attention with respect to his legislative efforts to monitor executive branch implementation of a 1993 law designed to measure the performance of government programs.²¹

Confer with the White House

Majority leaders regularly attend meetings at the White House — especially when the President is of the same party — to discuss issues before Congress, the Administrations’s agenda, and political events generally. For example, the joint bipartisan congressional leadership, including the House majority leader, may meet

¹⁷ Speaker Tip O’Neill, *Man of the House* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 226-227.

¹⁸ Jim VanDeHei, “DeLay Nears Top of House He Reshaped,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 2002, p. A4.

¹⁹ Susan Crabtree, “DeLay Will Deliver a ‘Speech of the Week,’” *Roll Call*, Jan. 29, 2003, p. 13.

²⁰ Dick Armey and Billy Tauzin, “Should We Scrap the System,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 6, 1997, p. A11.

²¹ Stephen Barr, “House Leader Flunks Agencies’ Plans,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 27, 1997, p. A17.

at the White House to discuss agenda priorities for the year.²² There are occasions, too, when the President will journey to Capitol Hill to meet with the top leaders of Congress. There are instances as well where majority leaders can be sharp critics of the President. Majority leaders consult with executive branch officials plus scores of other individuals (foreign dignitaries, governors, mayors, and so on.)

Majority leaders may also be active on international issues: brokering foreign policy compromises with the White House, championing the interests of certain nations, or criticizing some foreign governments. In general, anyone who occupies the House's number two leadership post has strengthened leverage with the White House and greater public prominence on international issues. "People are now listening to what I've been saying because I'm majority leader," declared a former holder of the post.²³

Strategically, the role of majority leaders will be different depending on whether the President is of the same party. In general, majority leaders will strive to advance the goals and aspirations of their party's President in the Congress. If the President is of the opposite party, then the procedural and political situation is more complicated. When should the majority leader cooperate with the President? When should he or she urge the House to reject Administration policies? When should he or she propose alternatives to the President's priorities? In brief, the majority leader, the Speaker, and their other party colleagues need to determine when to function as the "governing" party in the House and when to act as the "loyal opposition."

Facilitate the Conduct of Business

To expedite the work of the House, a wide range of other responsibilities is typically performed by the majority leader. For example, the majority leader may ask unanimous consent that when the House adjourns that it meet again at a specific date and time. He or she may ask unanimous consent to dispense with the Calendar Wednesday rule. The majority leader may either appoint people to certain boards or commissions or be self-named to various commissions or boards. He or she may lead congressional delegations to different parts of the world. The majority leader may act as Speaker pro tempore; offer resolutions affecting the operations of the House, such as establishing the hour of daily meeting of the House; perform various ceremonial duties; and support initiatives to revamp or reform the internal procedures and structures of the House. In brief, the majority leader is responsible, along with other Members of the leadership, for insuring the orderly conduct of House business.

²² See Ethan Wallison, "Adding DeLay Makes It a 'Gang of Five'," *Roll Call*, Mar. 6, 2003, p. 3.

²³ Juliet Eilperin, "Mideast Rises on DeLay's Agenda," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 16, 2003, p. A7.

Party

The majority leader, former Speaker “Tip” O’Neill once said, “helps set policy and carries out the duties assigned to him by the Speaker.”²⁴ One of the most important duties of the majority leader is to try to ensure that his or her party remains in control of the House. After all, legislative organization is party organization. The majority party sets the agenda of the House and controls all committee and subcommittee chairmanships. Thus, along with other party leaders and Members, the majority leader works in numerous ways to help elect and reelect rank-and-file partisan colleagues, to forge unity on priority legislation, and to promote a favorable public image of the majority party. Three activities of the majority leader illustrate these points.

Assist Colleagues’ Reelection Campaigns

Majority leaders are typically energetic campaigners on behalf of their partisan colleagues. They assist incumbents and challengers in raising campaign funds, and they travel to scores of House districts to campaign with either incumbents or challengers of their party. Majority leaders develop computer-based campaign donor lists, so they can funnel campaign funds quickly to electoral contests; establish their own “leadership PACs” to raise money and then donate money from their political action committee to candidates of their party; help to raise large sums of money so campaign ads can be run on television and elsewhere in the months leading up to the November election; and coordinate their campaign activities with congressional, national, and state party campaign organizations and encourage outside groups and allies to raise money for the party. Majority leaders assist in recruiting qualified challengers to take on incumbents. They promote get-out-the-vote drives, in part by devising strategies to energize their party’s grassroots supporters. In short, majority leaders are heavily engaged in the electoral campaigns of many party candidates. Their ultimate goals: to retain their majority status and, if possible, to increase the number in their ranks.

Promote the Party’s Agenda

Majority leaders may undertake a variety of actions to accomplish this goal. They develop legislative agendas and themes that address issues important to core supporters and swing voters in the electorate. These agendas may be posted on their websites. A key aim of this form of “message sending” is to animate and activate their electoral base to turn out on election day. Another objective is to develop electorally attractive ideas and proposals that may enable their party to retain or retake the House, the Senate, or even the presidency.

The majority leader may help to organize “town meetings” in Members’ districts, which publicize and promote the party’s agenda or a specific priority, such as health care or tax cuts. He or she may sponsor party “retreats” to discuss issues and to evaluate the party’s public image. The majority leader may also distribute

²⁴ O’Neill, *Man of the House*, pp. 218-219.

reports, memorandums, briefing books, and videotapes that highlight partisan campaign issues; conduct surveys of party colleagues to discern their priorities; organize “issue teams” or “task forces” composed of junior and senior lawmakers to formulate specific party programs; and form “message groups” or “theme teams” to map media strategies to foster favorable press coverage of party initiatives.

Sometimes the majority leader will attend partisan luncheons with Senators to better coordinate inter-chamber action on the party’s legislative and message agenda. “We’re having more bicameral meetings,” remarked a majority leader, “so that ... we understand what each other is doing ... and what can and can’t be done.”²⁵ Majority leaders are also named as conferees on major bills “to represent the overall interests of the [majority] leadership.”²⁶ In brief, the majority leader is a key strategist in promoting the party’s agenda, in outlining ways to neutralize the opposition’s arguments and proposals, and in determining when it is better to compromise with the other party on policy priorities or have no agreement.

Encourage Party Cohesion

If a party is to maintain its majority, it is generally a good idea to minimize internal factional feuds or disagreements that may undermine its ability to govern the House. One majority leader explained this job as a “combination of evangelist, parish priest, and part-time prophet. You have to be a peacemaker in the family.”²⁷ To forge party cohesion means, in part, that majority leaders will consult widely with the diverse factions within their party; they will argue the need for party loyalty on crucial procedural and substantive votes; they will try to offer persuasive arguments that “educate” colleagues on a measure’s policy and political benefits; and they will schedule breakfasts, lunches, or dinners to keep in touch with party members and to listen to their concerns. Aiding the majority leader in these efforts is his membership on various party units, such as policy committees or the committee-on-committees.

Majority leaders may also enlist the support of outsiders, such as lobbyists, to assist in building party cohesion. In fact, majority leaders may develop an external network of contacts in universities, think tanks, or consulting firms to function as an informal “brain trust” in policy development and in strategic analysis, suggesting how the majority party might mobilize the support required to enact their ideas into law. Majority leaders, then, work to boost their party’s fortunes internally and externally by acting as a political cheerleader, negotiator, consensus-builder, and peacemaker.

²⁵ Alan Ota, “DeLay Sees Improvement in Communications Between House, Senate Leaders,” *CQ Today*, Mar. 3, 2005, p. 6.

²⁶ Alan Ota, “Hastert Calls on DeLay as ‘Super Conferee’,” *CQ Today*, May 23, 2005, p. 1.

²⁷ Malone, “To Jim Wright, Being Majority Leader is One Long Juggling Routine,” p. 40.

Final Observation

The majority leader's duties and functions, although not well-defined and contingent in part on his or her relationship with the Speaker, have evolved to the point where it is possible to highlight the customary institutional and party responsibilities. As one majority leader said about his institutional duties: "The Majority Leader has prime responsibility for the day-to-day working of the House, the schedule, working with the committees to keep an eye out for what bills are coming, getting them scheduled, getting the work of the House done, making the place function correctly." On the party side, the majority leader added: "[Y]ou are also compelled to try to articulate to the outside world what [your party stands] for, what [your party is] fighting for, what [your party is] doing."²⁸

²⁸ Christopher Madison, "Message Bearer," *National Journal*, Dec. 1, 1990, p. 2906.

Appendix 1. House Majority Leaders, 1899-2006

Majority Leader	Congress
Sereno E. Payne, R-NY	56 th (1899-1901)
Payne	57 th (1901-1903)
Payne	58 th (1903-1905)
Payne	59 th (1905-1907)
Payne	60 th (1907-1909)
Payne	61 st (1909-1911)
Oscar W. Underwood, D-AL	62 nd (1911-1913)
Underwood	63 rd (1913-1915)
Claude Kitchin, D-NC	64 th (1915-1917)
Kitchin	65 th (1917-1919)
Franklin W. Mondell, R-WY	66 th (1919-1921)
Mondell	67 th (1921-1923)
Nicholas Longworth, R-OH	68 th (1923-1925)
John Q. Tilson, R-CT	69 th (1925-1927)
Tilson	70 th (1927-1929)
Tilson	71 st (1929-1931)
Henry T. Rainey, D-IL	72 nd (1931-1933)
Joseph W. Byrns, D-TN	73 rd (1933-1935)
William B. Bankhead, D-AL ^a	74 th (1935-1937)
Sam Rayburn, D-Texas	75 th (1937-1939)
Rayburn/John W. McCormack, D-MA ^b	76 th (1939-1941)
McCormack	77 th (1941-1943)
McCormack	78 th (1943-1945)
McCormack	79 th (1945-1947)
Charles A. Halleck, R-IN	80 th (1947-1949)
McCormack	81 st (1949-1951)
McCormack	82 nd (1951-1953)
Halleck	83 rd (1953-1955)
McCormack	84 th (1955-1957)
McCormack	85 th (1957-1959)
McCormack	86 th (1959-1961)
McCormack/Carl Albert, D-OK ^c	87 th (1961-1963)
Albert	88 th (1963-1965)

Majority Leader	Congress
Albert	89 th (1965-1967)
Albert	90 th (1967-1969)
Albert	91 st (1969-1971)
Hale Boggs, D-LA	92 nd (1971-1973)
Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., D-Mass.	93 rd (1973-1975)
O'Neill	94 th (1975-1977)
Jim Wright, D-TX	95 th (1977-1979)
Wright	96 th (1979-1981)
Wright	97 th (1981-1983)
Wright	98 th (1983-1985)
Wright	99 th (1985-1987)
Thomas S. Foley, D-WA	100 th (1987-1989)
Foley/Richard A. Gephardt, D-Mo. ^d	101 st (1989-1991)
Gephardt	102 nd (1991-1993)
Gephardt	103 rd (1993-1995)
Richard Arme, R-TX	104 th (1995-1997)
Arme	105 th (1997-1999)
Arme	106 th (1999-2001)
Arme	107 th (2001-2003)
Tom DeLay, R-TX	108 th (2003-2005)
DeLay/John Boehner, R-OH ^e	109 th (2005-2007)

Sources: *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to Congress*, Fifth Edition, Vol. II, Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2000), pp. 1102-1103; George Archibald, "GOP Elevates DeLay To House Majority Leader," *The Washington Times*, November 14, 2002, p. A1; Susan Ferrechio and Alan Ota, "Charge Takes DeLay Out of Lineup," *CQ Today*, September 29, 2005, p. 1; and Alan Ota, "Upset Win Comes With Expectations," *CQ Today*, February 3, 2006, p. 1.

- a. Bankhead became Speaker of the House on June 4, 1936. The post of majority leader remained vacant until the next Congress.
- b. McCormack became majority leader on Sept. 26, 1940, filling the vacancy caused by the elevation of Rayburn to the post of Speaker of the House on Sept. 16, 1940.
- c. Albert became majority leader on January 10, 1962, filling the vacancy caused by the elevation of McCormack to the post of Speaker of the House, also on January 10.
- d. Gephardt became majority leader on June 14, 1989, filling the vacancy created when Foley succeeded Wright as Speaker of the House on June 6, 1989.
- e. On September 25, 2005, Majority Leader DeLay stepped down from his post. Majority Whip Roy Blunt, R-MO, served as interim majority leader until Ohio Republican John Boehner was elected to be the new majority leader on February 2, 2006, by the House Republican Conference.